



## Growing Up as a Girl in Late Socialist Poland: The Personal, the Political and Class in Feminist Quasi-Autobiographical Novels by Izabela Filipiak and Joanna Bator

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### Abstract

The article examines how representations of late socialism, seen through the eyes of adolescent girls, function in 'quasi-autobiographical novels' by Izabela Filipiak (*Absolutna amnezja* [*Absolutne Amnesia*], 1995) and Joanna Bator (*Piaskowa Góra* [*The Sandy Hill*], 2008). The authors, born in the 1960s and self-identified feminists, became voices of the women's movement in post-1989 Poland. From their novels, the picture of late socialism emerges as either nightmarish (Filipiak) or grotesque (Bator). Examining family relations, but also intimate relations (understood as political), the author argues that the novels' focus on gender/sexual differences is consistent with the dominant message of the women's movement in Poland, which after 1989 lost sight of class differences, contributing to their naturalization and taming. Through the aforementioned examples, the author demonstrates that late socialism is an essential component of the founding story of contemporary feminism in Poland, and that the topos of the conflict between mothers and daughters is a useful tool of its anti-communist identity politics. Discussing the issue of the literary genre, the article proves that the choice of a quasi-autobiographical novel, based on the *Bildungsroman* scheme, harmonizes with the biographical, artistic and political settlements of the 'breakthrough generation' with late socialism and transformation.

*Keywords:* quasi-autobiographical novel, mother-daughter relationship, coming of age in late socialism, Bildungsroman

## Abstrakt

Artykuł pokazuje, jak okres późnego socjalizmu, widziany oczami dorastających dziewcząt, funkcjonuje w 'quasi-autobiograficznych powieściach' Izabeli Filipiak (*Absolutna amnezja*, 1995) i Joanny Bator (*Piaskowa Góra*, 2008). Autorki, urodzone w latach sześćdziesiątych dwudziestego wieku, identyfikujące się jako feministki, stały się głosami ruchu kobiecego w Polsce po 1989 roku. Z ich powieści wyłania się koszmar (Filipiak) lub groteskowy (Bator) obraz późnego socjalizmu. Analizując relacje rodzinne, ale także intymne/osobiste/cielesne (rozumiane jako polityczne), autorka dowodzi, że nacisk powieści na różnice płciowe/seksualne pozostaje w zgodzie z dominującym przesłaniem ruchu kobiecego w Polsce, który po 1989 roku stracił z oczu różnice klasowe, przyczyniając się do ich naturalizacji i oswojenia. Na powyższych przykładach pokazuje, że późny socjalizm jest istotnym składnikiem historii założycielskiej współczesnego feminizmu w Polsce, a figura konfliktu matek i córek jest użytecznym narzędziem jego antykomunistycznej polityki tożsamości. Omawiając problematykę gatunku literackiego, artykuł udowadnia, że wybór quasi-autobiograficznej powieści, opartej na schemacie *Bildungsroman*, współgra z biograficznymi, artystycznymi i politycznymi rozliczeniami 'pokolenia przełomu' z późnym socjalizmem i transformacją.

*Słowa kluczowe:* powieść quasi-autobiograficzna, relacja matka-córka, dojrzewanie w późnym socjalizmie, Bildungsroman

## Coming of age in late socialism: generational experience and literary genre(s)

To date, late socialism has not been the subject of in-depth research in Poland. Only some individual events, such as the martial law of 1981–1983, the Solidarity movement or, more broadly speaking, the anti-communist opposition of the 1970s and 1980s, have become the focus of political history, which enjoys a dominant status in Polish historiography three decades after the transition (Friszke 2014; Paczkowski 2015).<sup>1</sup> When it is the subject of scholarly analysis, late socialism receives more attention from anthropologists, sociologists and especially from researchers of popular culture who debate the relentless interest in gadgets, music and films of the Polish People's Republic (*Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa*, PRL) (Bogusławska and Grębecka 2010). In the

intellectual and artistic practice in Poland, late socialism functions mainly as a space of affects, personal emotions and still-living memories, making it a useful tool in the politics of memory, the nature of which is becoming increasingly institutionalized (Chmielewska 2017).

The late phase of state socialism has become a more prominent topic in Polish literature. Since 1989, writers searching for an adequate symbolic form for the process of shifting from real socialism to liberal democracy drew upon the *topos* of childhood and coming of age in the PRL (Czapliński 1997). The figure of a child and/or a teenager, especially a girl, which was already present in pre-World War II literature and particularly significant after 1945,<sup>2</sup> in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century became an allegory for transformation—not only political, but also cultural—as it aptly embodied changes in gender roles, family models and sexual mores. Feminist critique, developing dynamically in post-1989 Poland, imbued the figure of a young girl with additional meanings, regarding it both as an innocent victim of patriarchal conditioning and as a symbol of rebellion, a sign of both subjugation and its overcoming (Kowalczyk and Zierkiewicz 2003).<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, growing up in late socialism became the subject of (auto)fictional works, while autobiographical texts focused on childhood during the interwar period and in Stalinist times. Perhaps the generational aspect played a role here, i.e., the older generations produced autobiographies, memoirs and family sagas, getting the most out of their own memories and seeking to root their genealogy in the history of the country. Autobiographical forms made it possible for authors to ‘bear witness,’ to talk about their experience and that of their families and how these intertwined within the grand scheme of history (Lejeune 1989). I demonstrated this through the example of (auto)biographies of women from intellectual circles, noting that their narratives about the PRL, usually dark and demonizing, formed a counterpoint to the story of a pre-war Arcadia, a Golden Age tragically swept away by the war and new communist rule (Mrozik 2013).

Autobiographical texts, which have been booming in Poland since the early 2000s, can be read as a response to literary experiments from the first years of the transformation, expressing postmodern uncertainty about the possibility of creating a *coherent* narrative describing the *true* fate of individuals and entire communities. Quasi-autobiographical forms, popular immediately following 1989, in which the authors drew from their experiences, but interpreted them quite freely, mixing facts and fiction, perfectly recorded the shocks of the transition period: the breakdown of the familiar world, the crisis of identity and interpersonal relations. It is in this approach to the narrated world and the writing ‘I’ that Anna Turczyn (2007, 205) sees

a fundamental difference between autofiction and autobiography: ‘W autofikcji nie chodzi o “odtworzenie” swojego życia, o poskładanie go w spójną historię, na końcu której odsłania się sens, ale o coś zgoła przeciwnego: całkowite rozszczępienie Ja i zachwianie podstawami “pewności siebie”.’ [Autofiction is not about ‘recreating’ one’s life, about putting it into a coherent story, at the end of which the meaning is revealed, but quite the opposite: the complete split of the I and the shaking of the foundations of ‘self-confidence.’] Autofiction is closer to a (quasi-)autobiographical novel than to an autobiography, as what they have in common is no obligation to fulfil the ‘autobiographical pact.’ A true picture of events, times and places is not expected in these literary forms (indeed, in postmodernism, truth is one of the most contested categories), although their similarity to those in the author’s real life is still noticeable: it is possible to capture the connection between some elements of the represented world and reality, as well as between life experiences of the protagonist, the narrator and the author. At least, this is how it is explained by researchers of the genre, who at the same time point to definitional ambiguities, i.e. difficulties in the precise distinction between autobiography, (quasi)autobiographical novel and autofiction (see Missinne 2019).

Significantly, the choice of autofictional forms was made mainly by representatives of the younger generations: those who were children in late socialism and became adults during the transformation. Born in the 1960s and early 1970s, they came from families that formed the urban intelligentsia, and right after graduating from university, or still in the process of studying, they started their journey into adulthood by fleeing Poland. They then lived on foreign scholarships and/or paid work in different parts of the world. In their literary debuts, which took the form of autofictional travelogues, immigrant diaries and notes by contemporary nomads, they expressed their first experiences with freedom. The return to childhood in the PRL, which was present in their subsequent works, can be considered a specific attempt to deal with their own biography in a way that was closely intertwined with the history of their family, local community and country. The choice of autofictional forms, however, reveals the impossibility of weaving them together: a world from the past cannot be simply recreated by drawing from one’s own memory; it can at best be sewn together from scraps of memory and stories that have been overheard. Interestingly, women authors were among the most sceptical about the possibility of re-creating a coherent story about one’s own life. For them, personal experiences had become an impulse to politicize the ‘woman question.’

This article examines two novels with girls as protagonists: Izabela Filipiak’s *Absolutna amnezja* [*Absolute Amnesia*] (1995) and Joanna Bator’s *Piaskowa Góra* [*The*

*Sandy Hill*] (2009). The heroines grew up in the 1970s and 1980s, and the stories about their childhood and adolescence were told from the perspective of adult women after the transition. In the case of Filipiak's novel, the protagonist does not grow up and remains in the world of childhood, like Oskar Matzerath from Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1959). Analysis of these texts that originate from a specific communication unit—feminist and academic—requires a note that they were written by authors belonging to the same 'generation,' understood here as an age cohort and community of world views and habitus (I label this a liberal-feminist generation in the conclusion; after 1989, it set the tone for the women's movement in Poland, and having entered the mainstream public debate, became the 'midwife' of Poland's neoliberal transformation (Mrozik 2012)). The authors of these novels were born in the 1960s (Filipiak in 1961, Bator in 1968), grew up in the late PRL (Filipiak in Gdynia, Bator in Wałbrzych), and left Poland around 1989. They both have periods of emigration in their biographies: Filipiak lived in France and the United States, and Bator in the United Kingdom, the US and Japan. They share an excellent education in the humanities (Filipiak is a professor of literary studies, Bator holds a PhD in philosophy), they have worked as journalists (both of them have published in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the chief liberal medium in Poland, and in top-shelf women's magazines, such as *Marie Claire* or *Wysokie Obcasy*, a women's supplement in *Gazeta Wyborcza*) and they identify with the feminist movement, having become its recognized voices after the transition. Their intimate knowledge of literature, including women's literature and feminist theory, permeates their works, also the novels discussed below. In these literary recordings of coming of age in the PRL, the popular feminist figures of a rebellious girl, a crazy woman, a witch, and a nomad serve as tools that support the construction of a strong, autonomous female 'I' and its gradual integration into Polish society of late modernity that is defining itself anew (Oates-Indruchová 2018).

While seemingly easy at first glance, a precise classification of the genre of the novels used for my analysis presents some difficulties. Przemysław Czapliński (2005) referred to them as 'initiation novels,' that is, 'narracj[e] o dojrzewaniu, o przekraczaniu progu dorosłości, o porzucaniu stanu niewinności i wkraczaniu w etap grzechu i doświadczenia' [narrative[s] about growing up, about crossing the threshold of adulthood, about abandoning the state of innocence and entering the stage of sin and experience]. Irina Adelheim wrote about them in a similar way. Using the term 'initiation prose,' she defined them as 'narration[s] about "initiation" into adulthood, realization by a person of his/her adjustment or maladjustment to it, [or] "ritual" of transition from childhood to adolescence and maturity...' (as quoted in Garasym 2012, 183). However, as Tetyana Garasym (2012, 183–184) demonstrated, both Czapliński

and Adelheim pointed to internal divisions within the genre of initiation novel/prose. They distinguished the ‘autobiographical type,’ characterized by an attempt to make the biography of the narrator and/or the main character of the story coherent, and the ‘anti-education type’ in which the child does not grow up, thus refusing to integrate into the world whose rules he/she questions. Garasym (2012, 187) argued that although initiation prose derives from the classic *Bildungsroman*, the lack of the traditional figure of a mentor who embodies doubt about the role of authority in present times, makes it ‘a postmodern version’ of the established genre rather than a mere continuation.

What is important for my argument is that the discussed novels register certain similarities between the life experiences of the protagonists and those of the authors. These derive primarily from the atmosphere of adolescence in the era of the declining PRL. Literary works recall the climate of family, school and social relationships typical of the 1970s and 1980s—marked by traditional, conventional, even violent forms—as well as the horizon of awakened aspirations within Polish society (especially among young people) and the narrow, limited opportunities to realise these aspirations. Bator’s novel additionally outlines the post-transition possibilities for fulfilling of desires of the generation entering adulthood after 1989: their dreams of breaking away from the pattern of their parents’ lives (see also Tippner and Zgrywa 2002). And yet it is hard to define these works as fully autobiographical. Therefore, following Svetlana Vassileva-Karagyozyova’s (2015, 7) approach, I choose to call them quasi-autobiographical novels. According to the researcher, the considerable popularity of the ‘quasi-autobiographical initiation novel’ in Polish post-1989 literature may be attributed to the fact that, first, unlike any other genre, it enabled the ‘the last generation of communism,’ which includes writers of this formation, to express its experiences. Secondly, this genre enabled the articulation of challenges and uncertainties found in the post-socialist reality: the birth of a new ‘I’ and its integration within the emerging political, economic and social order.<sup>4</sup> This inspiring diagnosis combines the current trend to reflect on the generational dimension of the political transformation with a careful consideration of the role of literature, not so much in how it registers social moods as how it shapes them, defining the aspirations of the society as well as its fears (see Artwińska and Mroziak 2020). Noting the fact that during the peak of postmodernist scepticism towards ‘grand narratives,’ Polish writers used the coming-of-age novel with notable frequency, Vassileva-Karagyozyova (2015, 40) delves into the musings of literary theoretician Franco Moretti, who has analysed the connection between the emergence of the bourgeois *Bildungsroman* and the processes of shaping modernity in Europe in the wake of the French Revolution. Moretti (1987, 5) referred to the *Bildungsroman* as a ‘symbolic form of modernity.’ He pointed out that

by registering the contradictions of modernity—the tension between youth/mobility/unlimited opportunities and maturity/settling into social norms or the limited nature of available options—and giving them meaning in a story that is both complete and open to continuation, the *Bildungsroman* enabled the fusion of the nascent modern ‘I’ with a society which, despite the ongoing changes, did not abandon the old tools of repression. In fact, it even gained new ones, such as the concept of ‘normality’—an invention of the nineteenth-century bourgeois culture (Moretti 1987, 3–14).

Referring to Moretti, this article discusses two novels about childhood in the PRL and adulthood after transformation—at the intersection of two worlds—as a kind of a record of the process in which the late-modern ‘I’ emerged in Poland and, more importantly, as a tool for its production. Thus, the focus is less on (re)constructing images of growing up in late socialism as it is on the function of these images in post-socialist discourse: what concept of the individual and what social project have these images helped to develop? Of particular importance is the question about the place of late socialism—its notions of gender roles, its family model and its visions of the state and work—in the identity politics of contemporary Polish feminism, as well as the question about the role that the ‘quasi-autobiographical initiation novel’ has played in shaping this politics.

### Women’s hell: ‘Absolutna amnezja’ by Izabela Filipiak

Izabela Filipiak made her debut in 1992 with a collection of short stories *Śmierć i spirala* [*Death and the Spiral*], which were the result of her experiences as an immigrant, mainly in the United States. Their narrator and protagonist, estranged both from the Polish national community and the émigré milieu, presents herself as a nomad, a free spirit without any roots. Though emigration freed her from Poland, it did not free her from gender inequalities, which she painfully felt abroad as well. But it was *Absolutna amnezja*, Filipiak’s first novel, that provoked a veritable storm in the Polish literary scene after 1989. Critics accused the author of producing ‘menstruation literature,’ filled with blood and vaginal discharge. The concept of women’s literature, of which Filipiak’s novel was to be a quintessential representative, was bitterly condemned as separate from ‘literature in general,’ as well as excessively political and belligerent. After years of political commitment, Polish literature was expected to provide unique concepts and fresh language, yet also to be less politically explicit. The novels written by Filipiak and other female authors who debuted around 1989, such as Olga Tokarczuk, Natasza Goerke and Manuela Gretkowska, shook up this literary

programme, upsetting critics with narratives about the sexual liberty of women and patriarchal oppression (Duda and Krajewska 2010).

The main character of *Absolutna amnezja* is the twelve-year-old Marianna, who lives in a seaside Polish city (likely in Gdynia or in Gdańsk) under communism. Hints interspersed throughout the text indicate that the novel's action takes place during the 1970–1971 school year. This is specifically implied through references to major increases in the prices of basic foodstuffs, workers' protests and the deployment of the military and militia to quell the latter. These are all historical events that occurred on the Baltic coast in December 1970 (Eisler 2008). Other references include events that occurred throughout the 1970s and even the 1980s, when literary scholar Maria Janion (appearing in the novel as Mistress) delivered her inspiring seminars devoted to Polish and foreign literature at the University of Gdańsk.<sup>5</sup> Izabela Filipiak wrote her Master's thesis under Janion's guidance in 1989 (Spinner, writing her thesis under the guidance of Mistress, is one of the author's *alter egos*). It is important to note that Janion recognized herself as the Mistress, and the author of *Absolutna amnezja* as a participant in the Gdańsk seminar. In the article 'Ifigenia w Polsce' [Iphigenia in Poland], which discusses Filipiak's novel, Janion thus refers to the work's autobiographical nature:

Tak się złożyło, że autorka wspomnianej powieści uczęszczała na prowadzone przeze mnie (...) konwersatorium, poświęcone problematyce transgresji (...) i pisała na moim seminarium magisterskim pracę pod tytułem *Śmierć jako gwałt. O poezji Stanisława Grochowiaka*. Byłyby to może w końcu fakty bez większego znaczenia, gdyby nie okoliczność, że w jej powieści – w pewnym stopniu autobiograficznej, pojawia się w dość istotnym epizodzie reminiscencja, dotycząca wzmiankowanych zajęć uniwersyteckich. (Janion 1996, 319)

[It so happened that the author of the aforementioned novel attended a seminar I led (...) devoted to the issue of transgression (...) and wrote a thesis entitled *Death as Rape. On the Poetry of Stanisław Grochowiak* at my MA seminar. After all, these would be details of little importance, were it not for the fact that in her novel – to some extent autobiographical – there appears in a quite important episode a reminiscence about the above-mentioned university classes.]

Janion (1996, 319) also mentions that in her public statements Filipiak repeatedly emphasized that 'studiowała polonistykę z zamiarem zostania pisarką. To również ją najbardziej interesowało: los kobiet piszących w kulturze polskiej' [she studied Polish language and literature with the intention of becoming a writer. This was also what

interested her the most: the fate of women writers within Polish culture]. This interest is clearly visible in *Absolutna amnezja*—both in the life stories of the protagonists as well as in their readings and own attempts at writings, which I discuss below.

At first glance Marianna seems like any other girl: she goes to school, she gets sick, she celebrates holidays. However, the reality of her life, of which we know little, is merely the external, superficial layer, as the main action of the novel takes place within Marianna's imaginary, internal world. The year in which the events of *Absolutna amnezja* take place is special for the protagonist: she gets her first period, which, according to ancient beliefs, or maybe just to feminist theory, turns her into something akin to a medium, a connector between the world of the living and that of the dead (Driscoll 2002).<sup>6</sup>

Marianna sees and knows more. She realises, for example, her own condition as a woman in a world dominated by men. Both in life and in the literature she studies, she can see that the fate of a woman is characterised by violence, humiliation and a futile struggle for freedom. Repressive and ideological state apparatuses (here I refer to Louis Althusser's seminal work from 1970)—such as the traditional family, schools, hospitals, and the police—transform the existence of women living in a patriarchal society into an everyday hell. Men assign them the roles of daughters, mothers, sisters and lovers: women's status as *dupy* [pieces of ass] is revealed in a school play directed by Marianna's Polish language teacher, Lisiak, who is subsequently fired and committed to a mental institution for popularizing 'obscene content.' The relegation of women to the private sphere makes them an easy target of patriarchal violence, but it also facilitates casting them as guardians of patriarchy, co-builders of the system that represses women. Such a role is played by grandmother Aldona, the mother of Marianna's father (who is nicknamed the 'Secretary'), but also by Marianna's mother, Krystyna (sometimes nicknamed the 'Inconsolable,' and other times the 'Immaculate'). Both protect men's interests, disregarding their own needs and the needs of other women, in particular, their daughters.

The aforementioned Svetlana Vassileva-Karagyozova (2009, 10) notes that the action of many post-1989 novels about growing up in late-socialist Poland takes place within the family. The focus is no longer History—the battlefield of classes—but the private sphere, limited to a home's four walls. This drama setting will have a decisive impact on the identity of individuals and society as a whole. In Polish post-transition literature, the family is presented as a microcosm of complicated, largely dysfunctional relations: pathologies, such as emotional distance, blackmail and physical violence, are brought to light with the aid of literary tools, but are also generalized. Literature makes intergenerational conflicts eternal, timeless and detached from a social, cultural and

economic context. As such, they mask tensions whose source is different than age difference. This holds true for the conflict between mothers and daughters, whose literary depiction fits well within a stereotype of aggressive and inimical relations between women. In Filipiak's novel, Krystyna constantly accuses Marianna of egoism and thanklessness, while Marianna is terrified that her mother wants to sacrifice her childhood at the altar of great national causes. According to the gender theoretician Clare Hemmings (2011, 148), the mother–daughter conflict is one of the topoi of a classic feminist story. However, the mother–daughter struggle for power is paradoxically often waged under the careful observation of a man—the husband and father who, even if withdrawn, still protects the order within the house (in *Absolutna amnezja* the father has a lockable room at his disposal, he rarely gets involved in family matters, but he has a decisive voice in strategic matters like Marianna's education).

By observing her surroundings and reading literature, Marianna discovers that the oppression of women within a patriarchal system is universal, yet it also has some distinct features that are visible, for example, in the martyrdom and heroism of Polish women. By revealing the Polish state's pattern of violence against women, Filipiak highlights gender-based discrimination as being the core element around which Polish society is organized.<sup>7</sup> In her approach, the violence against women is private (domestic), but due to the actions of the repressive state, it is also political. Second-wave Western feminism's slogan 'the personal is political'—owing to institutions such as the Menstruation Police, which checks the physiological processes of women once a month—becomes painfully literal in Filipiak's novel. Women who try to break free from this hellish reality are branded, broken and pushed to the peripheries of society. This is the fate of lesbians, the insane, nomads and artists. Unfortunately, an open war against the patriarchal *status quo* is futile because women lack solidarity and mutual trust among one another. As a result, what remains are isolated attempts to escape this hostile world: into insanity (Lisiak), death (Aldona), writing (the Spinner), or an internal exile, into the world of one's interior child. The latter is the option chosen by Marianna. Unlike the French goddess of liberty whose name she bears, Marianna does not fight directly; she does not lead women and men to battle against their destinies. Instead, she leaves in search of what she had lost in the process of repressive socialization: her freedom. Thus, *Absolutna amnezja's* message is as follows: there is no place for revolution, for concerted action; there is only the struggle for oneself, for the freedom of the 'I,' which seems to be the only way out of the patriarchal hell.<sup>8</sup>

In Filipiak's novel, the realism of the fictional world—which references extra-fictional reality—is merely a complement to its numerous literary references. In a way similar to Marianna, who learns about the condition of women primarily from books,

the reader is forced to watch for literary road signs that reveal the subsequent circles of women's hell. Marianna studies ancient texts (Greek dramas), Old Polish (*Treny* [Laments] by Jan Kochanowski) and positivist works (the life and writing of Eliza Orzeszkowa), and discovers that the fate of women is equally dire there. *Absolutna amnezja* understands literature as a source of universal knowledge with regard to the situation of women, even though Filipiak's protagonist grows up in a specific place, namely, in the reality of a Polish socialist state. This state is revealed to be the quintessence of patriarchy, the embodiment of the enduring system of women's enslavement, the practical materialization of what can be learned from books.

In *Absolutna amnezja* the Polish state of late socialism is presented as totalitarian, because the control over women and their bodies is all-encompassing: in the family, at home, at the hospital. Filipiak is uninterested in historical facts, such as the legality and availability of abortion under socialism, sexual education in school curricula or the relatively good quality of medical care that new mothers received (see Fidelis 2010). The benefits offered by the socialist state are meaningless if it tramples on the dignity of the individual. In fact, in this respect the socialist state is similar to the fascist state, which is brought up in the novel with a reference to the 'barbed wire extended over the fence' surrounding the Secretary's bunker home, or via the scene in which he buries Marianna's dolls in a 'collective grave': 'Wspomnienia z życia obozowego. Nie może się z nimi rozstać' [Memories from the time he spent at the concentration camp. He can't let go of them] (Filipiak 1995, 45)—Marianna explains to a friend. The authority embodied by the father-Secretary is sadistic and takes pleasure in humiliating not only women, but also men if they do not adjust to the accepted norms (such as Marianna's step-brother Antoni, a former guitar player who abandoned his pregnant wife to sail the world).<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, the anti-communist opposition—embodied here by Marianna's mother—is ineffective, or even disloyal, as it is oddly or even masochistically tied to the communist authority, instead of persistently protesting against the violations of individual rights, such as those of Marianna. Thus, Marianna is stuck in the iron grip of a patriarchal family, which is an extension of the patriarchal state and its power, both universal and specifically Polish. Unable to fight it, she escapes: 'odchodzi, nie oglądając się za siebie' [she leaves, never looking back] (Filipiak 1995, 246), in search of a better world.<sup>10</sup>

According to Svetlana Vassileva-Karagyozyova (2009), various forms of escapism, including the refusal to grow up, are present in Polish initiation novels written after 1989. Here, the development of a child is frozen as a sign of protest against the violence of the state, a socialist state that crushes individual freedoms. The nascent identity of a young person cannot integrate into a society that is subject to this violence. The

fragmented narration of post-transition novels aptly mirrors the fissures within the 'I,' as well as the continued struggle to maintain coherence and autonomy. This results in the child protagonist's different forms of renouncing the self. Vassileva-Karagyozova concludes that Polish initiation novels play with the genre's tradition: by adopting 'the child's perspective on everyday life under communism,' they present 'the point of view of a true outsider who has not yet been corrupted by the system, thus achieving a defamiliarization effect and enhancing the authenticity of the narrative' (Vassileva-Karagyozova 2009, 1441). Interestingly, the aforementioned Franco Moretti (1987, 103–106) argues that the individual's refusal to conform to the existing world is no departure from the *Bildungsroman* pattern, but rather one of its few possible variations. In this particular variation, an individual's maturity is not indicated by growing up and integrating into society, but precisely by the refusal to participate in social rituals. Maturity is manifested through rebellion, through 'otherness' that is required to become 'oneself.' Thus, 'otherness' is an intentional construction, not to say a lifestyle, perfectly fitted to the rules of the new system, which the protagonist seeks or awaits. This is exactly the case with Marianna, who is about to leave for the land of Eight Earth (*Ósma Ziemia*) in order to remind herself of who she really is.

Filipiak's novel reveals the pattern of female fate—trying to find a way out of an impossible situation—but it also deconstructs a number of literary genres, especially those targeted at women readers, such as the novel for girls. It points out that literature is also a sphere of oppression, and that a fight in this area can only be waged through destroying the dominant conventions and rediscovering the lost, forgotten language: the language of children or of the insane (Cixous 1976). One of the storylines in *Absolutna amnezja* concerns Lisiak, Marianna's Polish language teacher, who writes a novel about the oppression of women, which unexpectedly turns out to be Marianna's diary. Lisiak does not finish writing: the pages of her novel are lost, some destroyed. In a psychiatric hospital, the teacher attempts to find the forgotten language of her internal 'I.'

The feminism of *Absolutna amnezja* is dark: it involves a constant deconstruction of reality, with no promise for the construction of something new and better. The influence of Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński's and Irena Krzywicka's accusatory writing is palpable. An advocate of women's rights in pre-WWII Poland, Boy-Żeleński authored the collection of essays entitled *Piekło kobiet* [*Women's Hell*] (1930) and was one of the strongest pro-choice voices in Polish history. In her novel *Pierwsza krew* [*First Blood*] (1930), Krzywicka described the awakening sexual needs of adolescent girls and boys, and in the essay 'Sekret kobiety' [*Secret of a Woman*] (1932), she fought against the cultural taboo surrounding women's menstruation. Filipiak also derived inspiration

from *The Bell Jar* (1963) by Sylvia Plath, one of the precursors of the second wave of feminism, and Margaret Atwood's dystopian *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which presents a dark picture of women's lives in a state run by religious fundamentalists. As in those novels, the world conjured by Filipiak is a hell from which it is hard to escape, where the rebellion and optimism of second-wave feminism have either not yet arrived or, on the contrary, have already failed against the total/totalitarian patriarchy of the Polish socialist state.

### **Not my mother's sister: 'Piaskowa Góra' by Joanna Bator**

While Filipiak outlines a dark image of the PRL as an unambiguously violent state, *Piaskowa Góra* by Joanna Bator turns towards a grotesque vision of late socialism. The novel is set in Wałbrzych of the 1970s and 1980s, in a region that is on the periphery politically, but of strategic importance geographically for the socialist economy: Silesia. The collective protagonist are miners' families who amass material goods during and following Edward Gierek's golden decade.<sup>11</sup> The rise of this social group—which was followed by a bourgeois lifestyle that flaunted TV sets, furniture and crystal vases—and its decline are the core of this story and the main grounds for its ironic undertone. The Polish bourgeoisie of late socialism is portrayed as both comic and annoying. It has no roots, as it emerged over a very short period of time, and its invented genealogy unlawfully replaces another, legitimate genealogy that is no longer present. On the one hand, the paternal grandmother of the novel's protagonist Dominika Chmura appropriates an aristocratic family's photo album that she found on a train, along with their family tree, and, on the other hand, it turns out that the Jewish branch of the family of Jadzia Chmura, Dominika's mother, was murdered in the Holocaust.<sup>12</sup> Shaped by socialism, the new bourgeoisie aspires to assume a position which it neither earned nor inherited, but instead received from the state along with an entire catalogue of commandments with regard to family models, leisure activities and raising children. Its members—men, but women in particular—are the target of more or less explicit jibes. They almost hysterically push toward a higher position within the social structure, and at the same time strive to keep the order: ensuring that social norms are observed and that those who do not fit in, such as fragile men, intelligent women, or gays and lesbians, are expelled.

Bator paints a stereotypical image of the late PRL: there is no place for ideals here, no place for struggle other than the one for social betterment, which she disdains as vulgar social climbing. Late socialism is ruled by bourgeois etiquette, the traditional family, homophobia and more or less overt antisemitism. It is a time of ordinariness,

but also of violence towards anyone who is not ordinary, like the colourful gay neighbours of the Chmura family, who get beaten up by unknown perpetrators. This world is funny, but sometimes also dangerous—like the Orient: explored, domesticated, but also scary due to the fact that it may attack you (Said 1978).

Dominika Chmura is the protagonist, and at the same time the author's *alter ego*. She was born in 1971 on Christmas Eve to Jadzia and Stefan, the granddaughter of Halina (on her father's side) and Zofia (on her mother's side). Dominika is strange and different. She does not fit into the world that surrounds her. Her interests (maths) are uncommon for a girl in her social milieu; she is friends with a lesbian and she ultimately falls in love with a priest. At first it is unclear why Dominika is a misfit: it could be due to the death of her twin sister at birth, or to the fact that she has been raised by grandmother Halina until the age of seven due to Jadzia's lengthy postpartum depression. Then the reader learns that Dominika's 'weirdness' is, in a way, genetically determined. It is caused by the 'Jewish gene' inherited from grandfather Ignacy Goldbaum, whom grandmother Zofia kept safe in a peasant hut during the war. When this secret finally comes to light after many years, the reason for everything becomes clear: her unconventional behaviour, talent and looks ('Pyłata jak buszmenka' [A bushwoman] (Bator 2009, 208)—says her mother), as well as the fact that Dominika is a misfit within the microcosm of Piaskowa Góra, the housing estate where she grows up, and within her own family, where she has a difficult relationship with her mother especially.

In Bator's writing, the narrative of the late PRL, with its grotesqueness, ugliness and hysterical aspirations, as well as steadiness, passiveness, pressure and violence, clashes with the narrative of freedom and diversity of the transformation period. The latter is understood as an explicit opening up towards the world and is celebrated in the second volume of the family saga—*Chmurdalia* [*Cloudalia*] (2010). The tension between the meanings encoded in the images of these two eras is mirrored in the complex relation between mother and daughter. As carriers of these meanings, they come to an unavoidable clash in Bator's novels. Jadzia is a living embodiment of late socialism: its primitive peasant roots as well as its grotesque aspirations of upward social mobility, obedience, violence and boredom. Her daughter, in turn, personifies everything for which there allegedly was no room in the PRL, everything that did not fit in and that came to the forefront with the transformation: diversity, movement and change. Jadzia does not have, or is unaware of, her own roots, which makes her feel at a loss, but Dominika is a nomad, and breaking free from her roots gives her a sensation of freedom. Jadzia is as coarse as the late PRL—chunky, tawdry, shoddy; Dominika is as colourful as a rainbow, ethereal and airy—she is an artist whose youthful portrait,

painted by Bator, 'is close to the traditional Bildungsroman, with the hero who stands out from the masses' (Garasym 2012, 184). In fact, both portraits are schematic renderings, but their positions in the aesthetic and emotional order of the novel are different: Jadzia's aspirations and phobias—though they sometimes inspire sympathy—are laughable and embarrassing, while Dominika is an embodiment of courage. She overcomes her own limitations and reaches for the impossible, which wins her the admiration and respect of the reader.

It is worth mentioning that in *Dominika*, the reader will easily recognize other familiar heroines from Bator's earlier works: a beautiful, colourful intellectual from the 2002 novel *kobieta [a woman]*, which historian Ewa Domańska (2003) defined as 'autofiction,' or a world-curious traveller from the 2004 *Japoński wachlarz [Japanese Fan]*—a combination of reportage, guide and travelogue on Japan. In each of these works, the writer's *alter ego* possesses extraordinary intelligence, original beauty, curiosity about the world and the desire for freedom—a liberation from places and people. Dominika is the younger version of the alter egos, and her story serves as an explanation of where they came from. In one of her interviews, Bator emphasized that her protagonists, and especially Dominika, share a lot of her own personality attributes, and that their life stories are modelled on her own biography:

Moja Dominika z *Piaskowej Góry* i *Chmurdalii* to kobieta nomadka, a ten rodzaj kobiecości jest wynikiem mojego egzystencjalnego doświadczenia. Nigdzie nie czuję się obco, bo nigdzie nie jestem do końca u siebie. Nigdy nie marzyłam o domu i tradycyjnej rodzinie, o tym, by gdzieś osiąść. Są miejsca, w których lubię być – Tokio, Nowy Jork, Warszawa, wyspa Karpathos – ale jak dotąd nigdzie nie chciałam zostać na zawsze. To zabawne, ale nadal miejscem, w którym byłam najdłużej, pozostaje Piaskowa Góra. Dorosła Dominika z *Chmurdalii* jest mi więc bardzo bliska. Miałam 18 lat, gdy wyjechałam z Wałbrzycha, uciekając w popłochu. Kolejne wynajmowane mieszkania i stacje, których było, jak policzyłam, 35. Zawsze, kiedy pojawiała się perspektywa, że mogę gdzieś osiąść, błyskawicznie znajdowałam coś, co sprawiało, że ruszałam dalej. (Słoniowska 2013)

[My Dominika from *Piaskowa Góra* and *Chmurdalia* is a nomad woman, and this kind of femininity is the result of my existential experience. I don't feel like a stranger anywhere, because I'm nowhere fully at home. I have never dreamed of a home and a traditional family, of settling down somewhere. There are places I like to be—Tokyo, New York, Warsaw, Karpathos Island—but so far, I didn't want to stay anywhere forever. It's funny, but Piaskowa Góra is still the place I have been the

longest. So the adult Dominika from *Chmurdalia* is very close to me. I was 18 when I left Wałbrzych, fleeing in panic. I continued to rented flats and lodgings, which totalled, as I once counted, 35. Whenever there was a prospect that I could settle somewhere, I immediately found something that made me move on.]

It is difficult to find a place for Jadzia, who personifies the PRL, within the female genealogy constructed by Bator, which is in a way a metaphor for contemporary Polish feminism's search for its own roots. As a representative of the new women from the period following the transition, Dominika has to seek out new female role models. She finds them in her grandmothers, especially in Zofia, who fell in love with a Jew, in her American aunt Ruth, her mother's stepsister, and in her friends Grażynka (from Wałbrzych) and Sara Jackson (whom she meets in Munich). Relationships of choice replace blood relations in Bator's novels. The new women in this model—Dominika, a traveller and photographer for a prestigious magazine, and Małgosia Lipko, a lesbian doctor who lives in London, both colourful and independent—find a common language with other women from their generation and those from the previous one, but not with their own mothers, with whom they seem to have nothing in common (Chmielewska 2011).<sup>13</sup>

One of the chief slogans of Western third-wave feminism—'I am not my mother's sister'—rings throughout Bator's novels, where she skilfully employs feminist figures. In the 1990s and early 2000s, this slogan expressed the 'daughters'' desire for ideological and practical separateness. They distanced themselves from the political strategies of second-wave activists of the 1960s and 1970s, who were their symbolic and sometimes real 'mothers' (Henry 2004; Muller 2016). However, in this respect I believe that in Bator's novels this is about more than just intergenerational conflicts. Within the Polish context, the legitimacy of feminism is at stake: its vision of emancipation, its concept of women's agency and empowerment. While telling the story of women from Piaskowa Góra, Bator searches for the roots of Polish feminism or, better said, she invents them by availing herself of Polish and Western liberal traditions especially, which were founded upon respect for difference, diversity and multiculturalism. The PRL is thus excluded from feminist genealogy as it is understood: it is a separate entity, a strange and mismatched one that is 'outside of the bracket of women's history' (Mrozik 2014); it is like the Orient, which must be explored and domesticated, but which cannot ever be accepted as anything but distinct. The 'domestication' of Jadzia can only happen on Dominika's terms: the mother finally abandons Wałbrzych and travels with her daughter to the Greek island of Karpathos. Only there, far from her own world, which collapses on a day where there is a great

downpour, an almost biblical deluge (which damages the structure of the apartment blocks in Piaskowa Góra), and where Jadzia goes through both a physical (the sun makes her hair lighter and her skin darker) and a mental transformation (she becomes more open to new experiences), is she finally able to find a common language with her daughter.

Joanna Bator's Wałbrzych trilogy—*Piaskowa Góra* and *Chmurdalia*—is a feminist *Bildungsroman* (see Labovitz 1986; Felski 1989) from the period of entrenched free-market democracy, twenty years after the political transition. As Svetlana Vassileva-Karagyozova (2015, 9) observed, by stretching the story of growing up into two volumes, Bator demonstrates that identity needs time to take shape. The development of an individual proceeds to the rhythm set by the changes that occur in a society that is breaking away from state socialism and embarking on a journey towards capitalism—a lengthy process. The new identity is principally shaped by acquiring a new attitude toward work. As illustrated by the lives of Stefan and Jadzia, work under socialism aimed to satisfy needs and acquire material goods; it was stable, predictable and boring. In capitalism, work is meant to be a source of personal growth, it is meant to provide satisfaction. It does not have to be performed at the same location throughout one's life, which is illustrated through the example of Dominika, who goes from being a strawberry picker on a plantation near Munich to an established photographer on the Greek island of Karpathos. As per neoliberal philosophy, the employee is expected to be flexible: their work is not merely a source of income, but also an opportunity to express oneself; work is a lifestyle, and lifestyle is an art. Attitudes toward family and sex are similarly flexible—not in terms of blood ties, but of choice; not of monogamous marriage, but of partnership—as are the relations with everyone else: these are established and maintained via conversations that are, as Anthony Giddens (1991) wrote, one of the tools for creating a late-modern reflexive identity.

In Bator's novels, the process of manufacturing a neoliberal subject is presented as natural. This is precisely thanks to the use of the coming-of-age novel pattern. Dominika sheds her childhood in the PRL like a snake sheds its skin. But what comes easily to her is stressful for her mother. Jadzia must change her life and turn regrets into contentment, loss into gain. Her new identity does not emerge spontaneously. It is the end result of learning, which does not occur without some coercion and shame: coercion to negate her old lifestyle and value system, and shame in having done it so late.

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### Conclusion: ‘midwives of the transformation’

In my book from 2012, I pointed out that feminist activists, scholars, publicists and writers who debuted around 1989 not only reproduced but also supported the neoliberal discourse of transformation in Poland (Mrozik 2012). I demonstrated that post-transition women’s literature focused mainly on gender differences as a determinant of human relations: on the one hand, it touched on the issue of gender inequality, of violence against women, of patriarchal apparatuses of oppression, but also, on the other hand, on issues such as a woman’s right to experience sexual pleasure as well as her need for freedom and independence. I also pointed out that other types of differences and inequalities, especially those pertaining to class, were disappearing from women’s literature. The Polish women’s movement, as well as its literature, focused on cultivating a second-wave maxim that the personal is political, but by reducing this slogan to the issue of gender, it ignored all other issues. As demonstrated by the dispute over *Absolutna amnezja*, politics—which hardly played a significant role in Polish literature during the 1990s—had a chance to mainly stand out in the form of identity politics: one of lifestyle and freedom of choice.

In my current research, I argue that in the 1990s and in the early twenty-first century, the women’s movement in Poland—including within the sphere of literature—became part of an urban elite discourse that did not so much gender class as it replaced it with gender as an analytical category, while also replacing social and economic inequalities with gender and sexual ones. The PRL had its own specific place within this story of the women’s movement. It was eluded, denied, treated as a hole, as a break in women’s history; at other times it was demonized, ridiculed or, rarely, approached with nostalgia, and as such became something from which the women’s movement had to cut itself off if it wanted to function in the social consciousness as modern, open and progressive. The feminists of the ‘breakthrough generation’ argued that socialist gender policy was a deception, that it imposed a ‘double burden’ on women—that the activists of state women’s organizations were non-autonomous due to the fact that their decisions depended on the Party (see Grabowska 2018). Such thinking with regard to the PRL was not only present in feminist publications for an academic and wider readership, but also in feminist fiction. These types of writing not only reproduced it, but also consolidated it in social perceptions. In retrospect, it is noticeable that the largely stereotypical portrait of state socialism as unfriendly to women was painted by those feminist circles whose hopes and expectations were to be fulfilled by free-market democracy—in 2009, they celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the transition at the Congress of Polish Women, which primarily

brought together businesswomen and other categories of successful women, and marginalized the voices of dissatisfied women who were disadvantaged by the transformation. The PRL, with an emancipatory agenda carried out mainly by state women's organizations, became a kind of hostage to the post-transition era, to liberal feminism in its battle for legitimacy in representing women's interests in Poland, and to the concept of 'generational change' that served to naturalize political change (Mrozik 2011).

Feminist writers who belonged to the 'breakthrough generation' and who represented a liberal faction of the women's movement drew from an entire arsenal of methods with respect to aesthetics, narrative-making and genre in order to tell the story of the PRL, especially of its last stage, one in which it was either an oppressive and violent state, or one that was shabby and grotesque. In their works, including the novels discussed in this article, there was a palpable tendency to orientalise the PRL as well as to demonize and ridicule it. The (inter-)generational relations that these novels depict served not only to illustrate the change, the tension between what was and what is, but also to legitimize the project of liberal free-market democracy as 'the best possible world.' This world drew from the Polish traditions of the interwar period (founded upon the intelligentsia's tale of Poland as a multicultural and progressive country), but also from the Western traditions (resounding with second-wave slogans of sisterhood and free choice). Within this narrative of post-1989 feminism, the PRL was somewhat of a different order: it was—and still is—a past that must be rejected in order to continue advancing. This rejection must be complete, which is why in addition to academia and public discourse, it must also take place within literature and art, as this is where the reproduction of affect and habitus occurs.

Different variants of the initiation novel, efficiently utilized by feminist writers, helped to cope with the baggage of the PRL, assigning it a place within the discourse of transformation that has evolved over the years. Immediately following the transition, Filipiak employed the pattern of an anti-educational novel with a protagonist who—terrified of the past, but also distrustful of the future—refused to enter adulthood and thus form her biography, make it complete. In contrast, the *Bildungsroman* matrix used in Bator's two novels enabled the protagonists to overcome their identity problems, find their place in life and thus harmonize their biographies. Feminist interventions did not therefore violate the rules of the classic genre, but instead adapted relatively smoothly.

However, it is hard not to notice that the political and literary project discussed in this article was deeply immersed in the life stories of feminists from the 'breakthrough generation.' In their novels about growing up in late socialism, they faced their

biography again and, paradoxically—after years of traveling and leading a nomadic lifestyle, which they talked about in interviews (Walczewska 2005) and described in their literary pieces—made an attempt to weave it with the history of their country of origin. The PRL was therefore something that they not only had to reject in order to be able to function politically and artistically, but also something that they returned to. This is because it formed more of a part of themselves than they wanted to admit. The choice of the ‘quasi-autobiographical’ formula was an excellent tool to reconcile these contradictions.

Today, thirty years after the political transformation, it seems as if the topos of ‘growing up in late socialism’ is starting to exhaust itself as a symbolic formula of late modernity (at least in Poland, or, to be more specific, in Polish literature), to refer to Franco Moretti once again. According to Italian historian Enzo Traverso, the memory of state socialism will not determine the framework for debate within a longer perspective, as new challenges and threats are looming over the horizon, such as the rise of right-wing populism, the climate crisis, etc.<sup>14</sup> (And I would add that the generation for which the experience of the political breakthrough was a formative one gradually goes down in history.) These will be the fuel for new politics, new languages and new imaginations. I see an opportunity in this for Polish literature, including the feminist one, to rework its own tools and to rethink its role in a continuously changing society. Better yet, it can be used for working out a symbolic formula that will best express the contradictions of an even later modernity.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Social history, which has developed relatively slowly in contemporary Poland, reflects mainly on the first postwar decades. Researchers of the history of women and women's movement, who are at the forefront of the field, point to many emancipatory solutions introduced by post-1945 communist authorities into the labour market, education system and family life (Fidelis 2010; Jarska 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Literary critic Eliza Szybowicz (2021) analysed not only the changes that occurred within the genre of 'literature for girls' after the war, but also the heated discussions of critics who regarded it as an important tool for educating young women in the spirit of loyalty to the ideals of socialism.

<sup>3</sup> In her 1996 essay entitled 'W świetle pokwitających dziewcząt' [In the Light of Pubescent Girls], literary scholar Ewa Kraskowska analysed this figure, focusing on Olga Tokarczuk's *E.E.* (1995), Izabela

Filipiak's *Absolutna amnezja* [*Absolute Amnesia*] (1995) and Tomek Tryzna's *Panna Nikt* [*Miss Nobody*] (1994).

<sup>4</sup> Svetlana Vassileva-Karagyozova (2015, 14–39) observes that the generational experience of people born in Poland between 1960 and 1975 consisted of both childhood and adolescence in the late PRL— with the symbolic moment of martial law being introduced on 13 December 1981— as well as adulthood in a liberal democracy and free-market economy. This experience became the foundation for the biography of the 'breakthrough generation,' which perceived itself as unique because it lived in two epochs, at the intersection of history.

<sup>5</sup> Maria Janion (1926–2020) was the patron of academic feminism in contemporary Poland. Her seminars, conducted at the University of Gdańsk between 1970 and 1990, were hugely popular among students. They resulted in a seven-volume series titled *Transgresje* [*Transgressions*] (1981–1988).

<sup>6</sup> A similar trope can be found in Olga Tokarczuk's *E.E.* According to Przemysław Czapliński (2005), supernatural phenomena, frequent in initiation novels, symbolize strangeness and horror of adolescence.

<sup>7</sup> Based on the work of Dutch historian Francisca de Haan (2013), we may say that 'gender-only feminism' seeks the cause of women's oppression in gender inequality, while 'multi-issue feminism' draws attention to the intersection of axes of domination based on gender, class, ethnicity, etc.

<sup>8</sup> This type of individualistic thinking about the necessity to liberate women from patriarchal hell, such as that present in *Absolutna amnezja*, was characteristic of Polish liberal feminism after 1989. It was inspired primarily by the intellectual influences of the Western, mainly American, women's movement, with which many Polish scholars and activists of Filipiak's generation came into contact not only during their travels abroad, but also through reading seminal texts of second-wave feminism. At the same time, this way of thinking was a reaction to the specifically Polish context which, dictated by historical circumstances, imposed the traditional role of the Mother Pole (*Matka Polka*) on entire generations of Polish women.

<sup>9</sup> Filipiak, who came out as a lesbian in 1998, devoted a great part of her literary, journalistic and scholarly work to the issues of otherness, difference and discrimination on the basis of gender and sexuality. In her 2003 collection of essays *Kultura obrażonych* [*The Culture of the Offended*], she wrote about Polish violence against the LGBT community. In her 2005 play *Księga Em* [*The Book of Em*] and her 2007 doctoral dissertation *Obszary odmienności. Rzecz o Marii Komornickiej* [*The Area of Difference: About Maria Komornicka*], she analysed the life and work of the Polish modernist poetess Maria Komornicka (1876–1949) who rejected her female gender and began to present herself in public as a man under the name Piotr Włast. In *Absolutna amnezja*, published before Filipiak's coming out, we can find traces of the author's non-heteronormative experiences. They find expression in the history of the relationship between Lisiak and Spinner: writers and participants of the Mistress's seminar. Lisiak's madness, separated from the outside world in a mental hospital, is the tragic culmination not only of the story about the fate of female artists, but also lesbians in Poland's heteronormative patriarchal culture. Though Filipiak was interested in this issue on the theoretical level, she also experienced it herself as a lesbian woman, eventually expressed it in her novel. She mentioned this in one of her interviews:

Moja strategia polegała na tym, że używałam ważnego tematu pod względem egzystencjalnym lub historycznym i dodawałam dość dużo heteroseksualizmu, żeby tę książkę sprzedać. Ale jednocześnie homoseksualizm, niekonwencjonalny heteroseksualizm lub wielokulturowość były tam wciąż obecne, i to, że nie można było tej książki, wraz z jej subwersyjnym ładunkiem, całkowicie odrzucić i przemilczeć, musiało budzić irytację, gniew, niepokój, złość. I to jest właśnie dziwne, bo ja przecież szłam na ustępstwo, a jednak nie mogliśmy się spotkać w pół drogi. (Filipiak, Kulpa and Warkocki 2010, 164–165)

[My strategy was to use an existential or historical topic that was important, and to add enough heterosexuality to sell this book. But at the same time, homosexuality, unconventional heterosexuality or multiculturalism were still present there, and the fact that this book, with its

subversive element, could not be completely dismissed and kept silent must have evoked irritation, anger and anxiety. And this is strange, because I was making a concession, and yet we couldn't meet halfway.]

<sup>10</sup> Criticism of masculinized opposition groups that deprived women of agency by assigning them the stereotypical roles of wives and mothers is also present in Filipiak's short story 'Weronika, portret z kotem' [Portrait of Weronika with a Cat] from the volume *Niebieska menażeria* [*The Blue Menagerie*] (1997). The title character, the artist Weronika, loses her colourfulness and uniqueness when she becomes involved in the opposition activities carried out by her son and his male friends. By adopting the traditional role of the Mother Pole, she becomes silent, colourless, and without qualities. After 1989, the theme of patriarchal relations in opposition circles, including the marginalization of women engaged in anti-communist activity, was the subject of critical reflection by feminist intellectuals. The story of the 'women of Solidarity,' the quiet heroines of anti-communist struggle, was first brought to light by the American journalist Shana Penn. Her 1994 article 'The National Secret,' which later became the basis of her book *Solidarity's Secret* (2005), sparked a lively discussion in Poland that involved writers such as Agnieszka Graff (1999) and Ewa Kondratowicz (2001).

<sup>11</sup> Edward Gierek was the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party between 1970 and 1980. The first half of his term in particular, with its increased consumption and mass-scale residential construction, is remembered as a time of prosperity. The second half of his term saw a decrease in the living standards of Poles and a general worsening of the country's economic situation, which was triggered by the rushed repayment of loans taken out from the West. This, in turn, was spurred by the global oil crisis. Gierek was removed from power soon after the establishment of the 'Solidarity' movement.

<sup>12</sup> Philosopher Andrzej Leder (2014) argues that the extermination of Jews and depriving the aristocracy of influence paved the way to the advancement of disadvantaged classes in postwar Poland.

<sup>13</sup> The theme of grandmothers is an interesting one in Polish post-transition novels. Svetlana Vassileva-Karagyozova (2011) notes that grandmothers are more important role models for girls than mothers; they are a kind of a road sign that leads them toward adulthood. However, writing about the role of good fairy godmothers (or at time witches, as is the case in Filipiak's novel, where Marianna is haunted by the ghost of dead Aldona), the researcher does not explain the specific significance of grandmothers in shaping the identity of young Polish women. In my opinion, this significance lies in the grandmothers' distinctive origin: their belonging to the Polish intelligentsia or to the decent rural people. It is the origin that granddaughters can inherit without any shame.

<sup>14</sup> I refer to Enzo Traverso's speech at the conference *Wokół historii społecznej: nacjonalizm i autorytaryzm* [*Around Social History: Nationalism and Authoritarianism*], organised on 14–15 December 2019 in Warsaw, Poland.